

*It's not every day that a trip to the zoo can lead to you
ending up on the other side of the Galaxy*

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FACE TO FACE WITH THE GORILLA KING

A short story for ages 9 to 90



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Face to face with the Gorilla King

An original short story by Ryan Cartwright

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Now, on with the story...

Dedication

This short story is dedicated to somebody I could not be without; my wife Claire. x

Part One

“It’s not every day that a trip to the zoo can lead to you ending up on the other side of the Galaxy”

It’s not every day that a trip to the zoo can lead to you ending up on the other side of the Galaxy. I mean it’s not something you expect is it? One minute you’re looking at a very bored Tapir and the next you are standing in fantastic palace before a very grumpy gorilla sitting on a large, golden throne.

The day started out okay. Well it was a bit boring if I am honest. We got up, got dressed and had breakfast. I wore my “Nature is wild” t-shirt. It’s really cool with a picture of a small deer in the mouth of a large lion. Mum doesn’t like it but I insisted that this was the perfect day to wear it. We had breakfast and set out to catch the train to the zoo. Dad had taken the day off so the whole family could go, it being half-term and all. Mum fussed over whether I was warm enough and Dad strode off at a heck of a pace towards the station. All pretty much normal. The train journey was fairly uneventful as well. After a quick change onto another line we arrived at the zoo in good time. I was keen to see the lions but my sister, Jodie, wanted to see the penguins. The penguins were nearer to the entrance so we went there first. They were pretty cute I have to say and the way they walked was quite funny. Their swimming was amazing, particularly when you looked through the glass walls into the tank. I guess I should have realised something was up though as at one point I crawled into a bubble window to see the inside of tank and suddenly all the penguins swam over towards me. For a second I thought they were pointing at me but as I turned to tell my Dad the keeper arrived with a bucket of fish and they all swam off towards her.

Something similar happened at the reptile house. When I looked into the Komodo dragon enclosure one of them spotted me and, quick as a flash, ran over towards me. Others spotted it and ran over as well. By the time we had covered half the zoo I was getting very worried. Not only were the zoo animals apparently attracted to me but there was a growing collection of seagulls, pigeons and insects all seemingly following me. We asked a zoo keeper what might be the problem but he just said the animals probably mixed me up with a keeper and came over for food. When I asked why the birds and insects were following me, he said I was probably imagining it and they often hang around the zoo.

If he had been with us at the Ape house he would have changed his mind. The pride of the zoo is a large silverback called Titan. You'd recognise him from all the posters, bags, t-shirts, caps, badges, stickers, mugs and stationery with his picture on. When we arrived he was sitting in a hammock strung between two trees. As soon as we turned the corner and could see him, he started staring at me. Then, slowly he got up and walked over to our side of the enclosure. Normally being approached by a gorilla of that size would be quite frightening but we had a wall and a deep, wide pit between us so I wasn't that worried. I was surprised though because he wouldn't take his eyes off me. Actually as he got close I realised he couldn't take his eyes off my t-shirt.

"Do you like this shirt?" I asked in a patronising voice. The gorilla just stared at me then turned and walked away again. He disappeared into the buildings at the back of the enclosure and after a while reappeared with something in his hand. It looked like a brick but as he got closer I saw that it was a piece of carved, dark wood. I have to say I was transfixed. I stood there watching the huge, magnificent animal as it strode around the enclosure. He climbed up onto a platform and sat down. The wood was still in his hand and he held it up to his mouth as if to chew it. Suddenly he launched it high into the air and we all looked to see it flying towards us. It landed with a clatter behind me. Nobody spoke but some let out a gasp. The gorilla looked me in the eye and gestured towards the piece of wood behind me. Did he want me to throw it back? If so I doubt I could get it across the trench, let alone as far as the platform. I turned and went over to it.

"Don't touch it!" Dad said, "You might catch germs from the gorilla."

"Or pass some onto him." Mum added.

"He wants me to throw it back." I said, bending down to it. The carving was very intricate and detailed. I could see what looked like writing on the underside and, without thinking, I turned it over. As soon as I touched it there was a bright flash of white light and all of the noises of the zoo stopped. I must have passed out because for a second I couldn't see. Then gradually my sight returned and I realised I was lying on the floor. I stood up and brushed myself down. That was when I realised the floor had changed. Where there had been concrete, now there was polished marble. Also, where I had been out in the open before, now I was in a large room. Around the edges of the room were ornate chairs and the walls were decorated with silk fabric of the richest blues, purples and reds. The chairs were carved and covered in gold. In each chair sat an occupant who held a white tube about a quarter of a metre long with gold caps on the ends.

Each occupant was an ape of some kind. There were orangutans with large heads, chimpanzees sitting crossed-legs and gorillas with stern looks on their faces. I saw a wide strip of purple carpet stretch from some huge doors to a set of steps at one end of the room. At the top of the steps was a large, golden throne with long waves of white silk draped over it. On the throne sat a large silverback gorilla who leaned towards me and beckoned me with a finger. I stood rooted to the spot. I had no idea whether this was a dream or not but even if it was, it was one of the weirdest I'd ever had. The silverback again beckoned me closer with its finger. I started to walk towards the throne when a cough to one side made me turn and look. One of the chimps was bowing its head and indicated I should do the same. I did and continued walking until I reached the edge of the carpet. Not knowing what to do next I stood there, with my head bowed.

The silverback stood and walked down the steps to me. It took my chin gently in its hand and turned my head to each side as if inspecting it. I have to say I was petrified. I knew enough about gorillas to know that with one arm this creature could deliver a blow which would kill me. After a few moments of this inspection the silverback let go of my chin and stepped back a bit. Then something really weird happened and, considering what kind of day it had been, that's saying something. The silverback spoke. It looked around the room and spoke with a loud, deep voice.

"So this is the one. This is the human child the prophecy speaks of?"

An orangutan stood and spoke "Lord Titan seems quite certain of it my king. He says he was told the boy had arrived at the zoo but refused to believe it. When the child arrived at the enclosure Lord Titan saw for himself and was immediately convinced."

"This cloth the child wears," the silverback replied, stroking my shirt, "how close to the description in the prophecy is it?"

"It is a perfect match my king." The orangutan responded.

"Then he must be the one." The gorilla said. Then it turned to me and said "And you child, what do you have to say for yourself, can you do it?"

I suppose saying something, anything would have helped but all I could do was stand there with my mouth open.

Part Two

“Well, you’re a long way from Earth now.”

"Does the child speak?" The gorilla snapped. I must have stood there with my mouth agape for a little too long. It was just such an amazing situation to be in that I couldn't find any words. Here I was, face to face with a huge silverback gorilla, in some kind of elaborate palace - his palace apparently and he was talking to me.

An orangutan to one side spoke quietly to me. "It would be advisable for you to answer his majesty, young human."

"I'm not altogether what to say." I replied, without thinking.

"You can start by answering my question child!" the gorilla roared.

"My king," said the orangutan, "calm yourself. There are," it paused, "guests in the palace.". The gorilla snorted and started at me. I felt I should probably answer his question.

"I'm afraid I cannot tell you if I can do something your majesty, unless I am first told what it is."

Now it was the gorilla's turn to be stunned. He glanced at the orangutan who shrugged.

"You mean to say," the orangutan said, "you do not know why you are here?"

"That is correct." I said.

"Did Lord Titan not explain before he sent you?" the silverback asked.

"I presume Lord Titan is the gorilla from the zoo," I said and saw both the apes before me nod, "in which case I am afraid he didn't say anything to me. Not even that he was going to send me here. I don't even know where I am."

"What?" the gorilla asked angrily. There was a raucous noise from the apes around the room. "You mean, lord Titan has sent a boy to fulfil the prophecy and the child has no knowledge of either it or of my kingdom which he will save?"

"It would appear so, my king." said the orangutan, meekly.

"Can this child, a human child no less, really fulfil the prophecy under

such circumstances?" the gorilla turned and went back to his throne.

"We can but pray, your majesty." the orangutan said. Then it paused for a while and added "Perhaps we should consult an expert on the prophecy?"

"Are there any, above me?"

"No my king, of course not." The orangutan bowed, "but perhaps Augustus might be able to ascertain if this is indeed the prophesied boy."

"Hmmf!" puffed the gorilla, "that old has-been refuses to come to my court. Why would he take on this human?"

"Because my king, Augustus is obsessed with the prophecy."

The gorilla thought for a moment and then dismissed us with a wave of his arm. "Fine, take him to Augustus and see what he can do with him. But the battle is in two days and, prophecy or no, this boy will be entered into it."

"My King." said the orangutan and then to me. "Come with me, human." and he walked off. I followed, mostly because I had no idea what else to do."

We left the large hall through a small door in the corner and walked through a maze of corridors. We went down a few levels although there were no stairs. Instead there were knotted ropes and the occasional pole. My guide descended these with a lot more grace and ease than I did. By the time we arrived at a small, dark room I was quite puffed out. The orangutan indicated I should wait and then walked slowly into the darkness.

"Augustus?"

"What do you you want, Sharif?" came a gruff voice from the dark.

"You have a visitor, by order of the king." The orangutan replied. It was clear these two did not get along.

"So his majesty thinks he still has need of me, does he?" mumbled the voice, "What has he sent me now?"

"A boy."

"I no longer take apprentices. The king knows that."

"I didn't say a youngling. I said a boy. A human."

"A human?" said the voice. "You mean the prophecy?"

"That is for you to determine, Augustus."

A shape shuffled out of the darkness. "Oh this I will see." said the voice. I watched, more than a little afraid, as the shape stepped into the light and became a grey chimpanzee. It walked, dragging one leg, right up to me and held my chin, much as the gorilla king had. After a few moments inspecting me the chimpanzee said "You may leave." I started to turn but the chimp held onto me. "Not you boy. He," it nodded towards Sharif, "may leave."

Sharif turned and started to leave speaking over his shoulder. "The battle is in two days, Augustus."

"I know." said the chimp, "I have known for longer than you."

It released my chin and stood back. "So, young man. Who are you?"

"My name is.."

"I don't care what your name is. "The chimp interrupted, "I asked who you are. Where have you come from."

"Earth." I said.

"Ah, one of Titan's. How did you get here?"

"I don't know. I was at the zoo and a gorilla threw something at me. When I touched it, I passed out and woke up in the king's throne room."

"Was it wooden, this object?"

"Yes it was."

"With carvings?"

"Yes."

"And where is it now, this object?"

"I don't know." I replied. I decided to push my luck a bit. "Can you tell me where I am, I mean this isn't Earth and I have no idea what any of you are talking about."

"That makes sense." said Augustus. "I imagine apes that can speak are the stuff of stories on Earth?"

"Yes they are."

"Well, you're a long way from Earth now. This world has no humans on it. There used to be but they all died in the first centuries of the

war."

"War? The gorilla king and the orangutan said something about a battle. Who are you fighting?"

The chimp laughed, "We're not fighting anyone, not anymore. We used to. Whole armies of warriors lost their lives in the battles of old but war has become more sophisticated since then. Now we have smaller battles with select warriors. The winner of the battle gets to rule the world, until the next one."

"So these battles are smaller?"

"Much smaller and more entertaining."

"You didn't answer me." I said, "Who are your opponents?"

"Ah, I was hoping you wouldn't ask me that but as you have." he sat as he spoke and gestured for me to do the same. "Long ago this world divided into factions, all of whom wanted supremacy over the others. At first the factions all fought each other, then we made alliances but as ever they were soon broken. Then somebody came up with the idea of the battles. The idea is that the factions are paired off against each other with the winner given the chance to face the winner of another battle. Eventually only two will remain and then there will be the final battle. The winner shall reign over the whole world."

"And the gorilla king leads one of those two factions?"

"You catch on quickly boy." the chimpanzee smiled, "Yes, where there were once fourteen factions, now there remains two. The Simians and the Reptilia."

"Simian? You mean apes?"

"Yes and other primates and Reptilia meaning reptiles and their kind."

"Lizards?"

"Yes, all kinds of reptiles to be exact. If they win, the king fears all the world will descend into darkness." He saw my puzzled look and added "You have a question, boy?"

"Yes," I said, "what happens to the other factions? The ones who have been defeated in previous battles?"

"A good question. They are made to serve the victors. The two factions become one."

"So they become slaves? That can't be right!"

"Right?" smirked the grey chimp, "Since when did right have anything to do with war?"

"So where do I come into all this then?"

"Well, " said Augustus picking at his toenail, "many years ago a prophecy was made by one of the great wise apes. It said that when the final battle approached, a human child would be sent. It was said that this human would end the battles forever, bring freedom to all simian kind and, through them, to the whole world."

I puffed out my cheeks, "and you think that's me?"

"Titan does."

"The king mentioned something about my shirt?"

"Ah I hadn't noticed that but yes, it is remarkably similar to the prophecy." I must have looked puzzled so it explained further. "The prophecy said the child would be a boy of around your age and would wear a distinctive attire: green and bearing an image of a big cat devouring a grazer."

"Well that does sound like my shirt." I said. "What else did this prophecy say?"

"Nothing much really." he smiled, "You know how these things are? They are always vague and open to misinterpretation."

"So what does the king expect me to be able to do?"

"Do?"

"That's why he sent me to you. To find out if I can do 'it'. I just don't know what 'it' is?"

"Hmm," said the large ape, "I suspect neither does he. He will imagine, as have others, that you will fight in the final battle."

"Fight? Against reptiles?"

"I don't imagine he wants you to fight for them."

"No I mean, I can't fight. I'm just a kid!"

"Well you may be that but you are here and there is no other human on this world."

"I'll get hurt, I could die!"

"I imagine that's the point of a battle."

"Well I'm not doing it! Can you help me get back home?" For the first time since arriving I thought of my family, back at the zoo, probably wondering where I was.

"No, I can't but I can help you understand the prophecies so you have a better chance with the task."

"I told you," I snapped, "I'm not fighting!"

Augustus leaned towards me. "You may have no choice."

"There is always a choice."

The large ape sat back and grinned, showing what teeth he still had. He gasped as he spoke, "You are the one."

"What?"

"You are the one the prophecies speak of. I am convinced of it."

"I told you, I'm not fighting..wait prophecies? There's more than one?"

He chuckled, "Did you not think the other factions would have their own wise ones, all of whom prophesied victory for their faction?"

"But how can they all be right?"

"Exactly. They can't but still the kings put their trust in them because their subjects need to believe they will win."

"What about when they lose?"

"In that case the victorious faction will declare only their prophet had true insight and thus justifies them continuing in the war."

"You mean they could stop?"

"Indeed but it would mean trusting the other factions not to invade or enslave them."

"So nobody will take the risk?"

"You are smarter than you appear."

"So what did the other factions say about me?"

"Mostly the same stuff, that a human child would appear before the final battle and free the world from this continuous war."

"But each said the human would make their faction victorious?"

"Well, actually, no."

"No?"

"None of the prophecies say anything about a winner, just that the war will end. Of course the factions have all chosen to interpret their prophecy as meaning they will be victorious."

"So who will win?"

"Nobody knows, although that is not a popular view around here."

"But that is what you think?"

"Yes. The king banished me to this room for saying as much. He insists I am free to enter court at any time as long as I declare the prophecy speaks of simian victory."

"And you can't do that?"

"I won't do it."

All of this was very interesting but I was still trying to think how to get out of fighting and how to get home.

"Do the prophecies say what happens to the child after the battle? I mean if I survive, do I get to go home?"

"They don't mention that specifically and to be honest if you were the king of the victorious faction would you want to send away the one who gave you victory?"

"So I'm stuck here?"

"Maybe."

"Can you help me get home?"

"It is possible you could return the way you came but you would need the object that transferred you here."

"The piece of wood?" the ape nodded, "Do you know where it is?"

"If it is what I think then it will be locked away by now. However, the king considers it important to his victory and will probably bring it out at the battle."

"So if I could get to it there, it would take me home?"

"Yes but consider if you want to go home and the consequences if you do."

"Consequences?"

"If you leave before the battle ends, the simians will have to concede defeat to the Reptilia. The whole world will be enslaved to them."

"But if I stay, and the simians win, the world will be enslaved to them. Is that any better and who am I to decide such a thing anyway?"

The chimpanzee smiled. "Are all humans as wise as you?"

"I'm not sure I am to be honest but no were not. In fact we have moments of wisdom and even more of stupidity." I leaned in towards Augustus and looked into his eyes. They had a brightness which made him look younger. "Will you help me to get to that piece of wood?"

He thought and then said "I thought you'd never ask."

Part Three

“Your majesty, these fine simians require a strong leader at this time.”

Augustus looked deep into my eyes and sat back down. I have to say I was a little disappointed because I thought he was going to show me where the piece of wood was. Whatever it was, I needed it to get back home from this world where animals fought battles for supremacy.

"Well?" I asked.

"Hmm?" Augustus seemed deep in thought. "Oh, I suppose you're expecting me to take you to the Container. Sorry but I can't do that. I don't know where it is."

"The Container is the wooden object we've been talking about is it?"

"Quite. It is the most ancient object on our world and whichever king holds it is ruler of our planet. It is that piece of wood that everybody is fighting for. At present it is held by the Simian king but the last battle of this age will bring an end to that if he loses to the Reptilia."

"I'm confused." I said, "This age?"

"The container is fought over in a series of battles with the victor ruling the planet for five years after he has won the last battle. In the final month of those five years the battles take place to see who will rule for the next five years. We call those five years an age."

"So when you said the winner of the battle gets to rule until the next one you meant the next winner not the next battle?"

"Hmm? Oh yes that is correct my boy."

"So what's in it then?"

"In what?"

"This container. What does it contain?"

"Nobody knows."

"You mean you've never opened it?"

"Many have considered doing so but the legends say when the container is opened life here will end."

"You mean like a massive explosion or something?"

"Over the years many have speculated how it will end but in truth the legend only says that life will end, not how." the Chimp picked up an apple and started eating it. He tossed one at me as well which I am glad to say I caught. I'm not sure I'd have found it in all that mess if I had dropped it.

"If you don't know where it is, how can you help me get to it?" I said.

"I know where it should be, where it is supposed to be but if what I have heard is correct it is not there. The king has moved it."

"When I arrived here, the container was nowhere to be seen yet it still felt like my fingers were touching it."

"That may have been the one in your world that you could feel. Perhaps your fingers were remembering what it felt like."

That confused me even more. "Could we at least look where the container is supposed to be?"

"It is supposed to be under the king's throne. To remove it would require him to be not on his throne and for the throne room to be empty. Those two things never happen at the same time."

"So how can I get to it?"

"Again, have you considered the consequences of reaching it?"

I sighed, "I know the world will end but I need to get home and this isn't my world?"

"Would you really leave before the battle knowing it would enslave the world to one tyrant or another?"

I shrugged. "I'd like to but no, I don't think I can."

"Exactly." smiled the ape, "Now I said I would help you get to it but that will not be here and now. I will help you to take part in the battle."

"I said I'm not fighting!"

"You may not need to. If we can get you to the container during the battle all you'll need to is open it."

"I thought just touching it would send me back home?"

"No," the chimpanzee frowned, "it is not the same object as the one that sent you here. That is infused with magic whereas this one is

made of magic."

"Made of magic?" I grinned.

"Yes. It looks like wood but it is not wood. Nobody knows what it is made of. I do know that if you open it you have a better chance of getting back to your home and this world not descending into slavery.

"So what do I tell the king? He'll be expecting me to fight."

"Yes but he is also expecting you to know what it is you must do. Now you do and you can tell him that you know."

"Without telling what it is I am going to do." he smiled as I finished his sentence.

"Indeed. Come I'll take you back to the throne room." and with that Augustus swept off up the corridor I had arrived through.

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The king was just as grumpy when I arrived back. Augustus used the journey to advise me on what to say and how to say it but he would not enter the throne room. Instead he stood just outside the door.

"So you have returned?" The king said, "I note you were unable to convince Augustus to correct his blasphemy."

"With respect oh king," I bowed my head as I spoke, "that was not my task. I have returned because I now know what it is I must do."

The gorilla made deep huffing sound and said "So what is it you must do child?"

"I am not at liberty to say, your majesty."

As Augustus predicted this enraged the huge silverback and he leapt off the throne to just in front of me. "What!? You dare defy me?"

"Defy? No." I smiled, "I am not at liberty because what I must do must not be revealed before its time. Your advisers know the prophecy says this. Did they not inform you, oh king?"

This was a dangerous move but it worked, the king's focus immediately shifted to his advisers instead of my task. The advisers shifted and ducked, some locked their gaze on me though.

"Well?" the king asked his court, "Is what the child say true?"

No-one spoke and the shifting continued. There were some mutterings but nothing anyone else could hear.

"Speak!" the king roared. "Enough of these secrets!"

An orangutan, not the one who escorted me to Augustus, shuffled forward and bowed low. "My king," it said, "The prophecies are not always clear. What the child says may be taken from but one interpretation of them."

"Do you believe that?" the silverback asked.

"My king..."

"DO YOU?!"

"It seems a popular interpretation of the writings, yes." the orangutan bowed and returned to its place.

"If I may continue, your majesty." I said quietly. The gorilla waved a hand at me and sat back down. "Whilst I cannot reveal what it is I must do before time, there are certain things I need that will help me prepare." I gulped, "such as the Container."

There was an uproar. A cacophony arose among the apes around the room and got louder. Eventually the king stood and gradually silence crept around the room.

"You want our most precious keepsake?" the king said, "and you expect me to just hand it over?"

I took a breath, Augustus said this was the most crucial part of the exercise. I had to get this right or the king could kill me in his anger.

"Yes, your majesty but before you protest you should consider," I looked around the room, "you should all consider what it is you expect of me."

Stunned silence greeted me so I continued. "You expect me to end the battle and I shall. You expect me to end the prospect of a tyrannical rule on this world and I shall, you expect me to do this without preparation or consideration and that I shall not do. If I am unable to prepare, I may be unable to fulfil my duties. To prepare I need a quiet, secluded place and I need to examine the Container."

"Why?" a chimpanzee to my left asked.

I spun and raised my voice. "Because I am the prophesied one. Because I am the one who can end the battles and because I am the only one who can interpret it and I note you dare to speak before your king without his permission." The chimp backed down as he saw I rose to his challenge. The king grinned at my last sentence. Augustus had

coached me on this. He warned I would be challenged and this was how to defeat the challengers before they got too loud. I steeled myself and stepped towards the throne. There were gasps around the room. I continued walking and when I got to the foot of the throne I knelt and looked beneath it. As Augustus suspected there was nothing there. I stood again and faced the room.

"Your king takes his authority from the throne which is placed above your most sacred treasure, the Container. Except the Container is not beneath the throne."

Again there was a cacophony and I held up my hand to silence the room and turned to the king. "Your majesty, where is it?"

The king shifted and glared at me. "You dare challenge me?" he said.

I smiled, "I have no desire for your throne, you may keep it but you will tell me where the Container is or else I will not be responsible for the consequences." I was beginning to question how long I could bluff like this. Surely the king would expect me to back up my bold talk.

Again the king shifted and snorted and glared at me. "Your majesty," I smiled, "these fine simians require a strong leader at this time. Strength comes in many forms though and right now you need to show you are strong enough to trust me. Give me the Container and then you can return to being the great ape leader you should be." I looked him in the eye and said "Would you not agree, Servus?"

The gorilla looked shocked. Nobody had called him by his name in years. This was unsurprising considering it meant "servant". Obviously he didn't consider it a good name for a king.

"So Augustus has been busy with you boy?" he smiled. "You think you can come here and shock me by using my former name? You are mistaken."

"With respect, I seek not to shock you but to remind you, King Servus. The position you hold is one of honour but that honour comes not from the throne but the heart that sits upon it. You can and should be both king and servant of these your family, King Servus." as I bowed a large number of apes all bowed too. I continued, "Show your people what a king they have. Trust me."

The large silverback thought and eventually said "Fetch it."

"My king?" a courtier asked.

"Fetch the Container. Take it to my quarters and take the boy there too." then he looked at me, "You make a convincing argument my

child. Either that or you repeat another's argument," he looked towards the door where he thought Augustus would be listening, "but regardless of that I have no choice. If I refuse I shall be the king who resided over our defeat. Therefore I have no choice but to let you examine the Container.

"Your majesty." I bowed as I was again escorted out of the court by the same orangutan.

Servus called after me, "Know this, boy: if you fail me, the last thing I shall do is rip your head from your body."

I bowed and continued to walk out backwards.

We soon entered a large, well decorated room, in the centre of the room was a large table and on that sat a dusty wooden box. I walked over carefully and went to wipe the dust off with my sleeve.

"Don't" said a voice in the shadows.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because," Augustus said as he crept into the light, "to do that you will touch the box. To do that without examining it would be foolish. You do not know what it can do."

"Do you know?" I asked.

"No," he replied curtly, "but I know how to read it."

He inspected the box and the carvings without touching it. Giving the occasional "hmm" or "ah" as he did so. Eventually he turned to face me and laughed.

"What?" I asked.

"The container." he smirked, "It may be more familiar to you than you or I imagined. Look here."

He indicated some of the carvings and then directed my gaze to another side with different markings.

"Is that..?" I asked leaning in.

"Yes it is." my chimp friend said.

I turned to look at him. You mean all this the time the battles have been little more than .."

"Shhh!" he cut me off, whispering "There are more than just our ears in here."

"OK," I whispered, "but how does this help us?"

"Open the box and you'll see."

I slowly put my hands on the box and felt for the groove near the top. Slowly I placed my thumb beneath it and lifted the lid. I looked inside and smiled.

"What do you see?" Augustus asked.

"Nothing much." I smiled.

"But that is helpful to you, yes?"

"Oh yes," I smiled again, "and no. I now know what can be done but not how."

"That is where I come in, I suppose?" muttered the greying chimp.

"Yes I rather think it is."

At that point the door opened and Servus walked in. I closed the lid of the box and stood before it.

"So you are here my foe!" Servus snapped at Augustus.

"I am not your enemy Servus. Only you have ever been that." Augustus snapped back.

"I am not in your classroom now, old fool!" The king strode around the room as he spoke.

"Who's more foolish, me or the one who believes me?"

The king ignored this remark and turned to me. "What of you child? Do you have the information you require to grant us victory?"

"I have the information I require to end the battles." I replied calmly.

"Good. Then go prepare yourself." The king snatched up the Container. "The battle will commence tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow?" said Sharif, the orangutan who accompanied the king. "But the battle is set to be in two days."

"I have moved it." the King snorted, "to catch our enemy unprepared."

"Can he do that?" I whispered to Augustus. Augustus smiled and shook his head gently.

"It appears he has." then turning he started to leave the room.

"You dare turn your back on your king?" Sharif demanded.

Augustus half turned and snarled at Sharif. "When I have a king worth facing, Sharif, I will face him. Now I will go, with my young friend here," he took my arm and dragged me towards him, "and prepare him for what he must do."

As we started to walk out, Servus called after us. "Augustus, make sure the boy does not fail me."

Augustus stopped and spoke without turning. "If I were you Servus, I would be more concerned if it was I who failed him."

We left the room and went back to Augustus' dwelling.

"Now," Augustus said, "let's have something to eat."

"Eat?" I spluttered, "surely we have to figure out what to do tomorrow."

"There is nothing to figure out. You know what must be done."

"Yes, but not how to do it."

"Oh I think you can figure out that little bit without me." the grey chimp smiled at me and headed for a food cupboard.

Part four

“Do not fail me now boy!”

We ate in silence. I was somewhat preoccupied with the task before me and Augustus, realising this, spent most of his time examining his food in minute detail. Eventually it was I who broke the stifling silence.

"I know what the Container is." I said, "I know what I should do. I can't for the life of me think how I am going to get the other faction to comply." I tossed my half-eaten apple to the floor with a sigh.

"That," replied my chimp companion, "was a waste of good food." He looked at me and I shrugged. He seemed to study me and then said the last thing I was expecting. "Tell me about your family."

"My family?"

"I presume you have one?"

"Yes, yes of course I do. I just don't see how that will help."

"Humour and old ape will you?"

I sighed and told him of my parents, of my twin little sisters and our home. He gestured for me to go on and so I did, speaking about our daily life and what we get up to. "It's funny," I said, "I always quite liked my life until I came here. Now I see how boring it all is."

"Boring?" the ape chuckled, "My dear human your life is only boring if you make it so. From what you have told me, your life sounds full and active."

"Yes," I retorted, "but not with anything exciting."

"Exciting does not mean the same thing for everybody. I would imagine your sisters have very different tastes?"

"That's true." I said, "They may be identical but they could not be more different." I looked at him, "What is the story between you and Servus anyway?"

"I was his tutor for many years." the ape started to smile as he spoke, "He was always destined to lead the Simians. Not just because he was born into the right family but because he had a way about him that made others listen. The trouble was he was always limited in his

outlook. He had a very narrow view on the world. He was cautious of the world and eventually that made him paranoid about it. He only ever seemed to want to move one step at a time. I was brought in to broaden his horizons, teach him to look beyond what was in front of him. So to speak." He shrugged. I realised that the more often we spoke the less often I looked on him as an animal. To me he was just Augustus and it was the most natural thing in the world to hear him speak.

"How long did you tutor him?"

"Oh about ten years I think. He enjoyed it too. I told him tales of history and tales of fiction. I showed him how to think beyond what everyone expected, how to use the advice of those around him and when not to."

"So what went wrong?"

"His mother got sick. He was already King by then and he had surrounded himself with a host of courtiers and advisers. The problem was that few of them were in it for him. They were more interested in their own position, their own status, their own power. When his mother got sick, he summoned his advisers, including me. He was in grief and demanded we advise him how to save his mother. Of course none of us could do that because, sadly, she was suffering from an illness nobody recovers from. The other advisers were too afraid to tell him the truth and so they told him what he wanted to hear. They told him she had an outside chance if he did this or said that."

"And you didn't?"

He shook his head, "No. I told him what he needed to hear - as gently as I could of course. I also advised him to spend time with his mother, to enjoy the moments they still had and make them precious memories. He got very angry with me, saying I had given up, saying I was weak. I tried to explain but he started shouting about his position and the battles. When I repeatedly told him that the battles were not the future of our world, he got furious and he threw me out. I have never been back to his court but occasionally he will ask my opinion on a prophecy-related matter. Usually my responses only serve to make him more angry."

"He seems to get angry a lot."

"He's never really gotten over the loss of his mother. It's like he thinks he will dishonour her memory if he fails to become the ultimate ruler of the world."

"He's that upset about it?"

"Losing one's queen is a blow to anyone - especially in this world. This queen in particular was both wonderful and wise. She had Servus' ability to captivate others but without the limitation Servus placed upon himself. With her you felt she could and would go anywhere for her people."

"So Servus has been like this since she died?"

Augustus shook his head in sadness "I don't think he has ever felt up to the task of ruling without her."

"None of this helps me with my task of course." I said. Then something occurred to me. "Before he was king, did Servus take part in the battles?"

"Yes."

"Alongside his mother?"

"He stood on her right flank."

"So that means he was..." I paused, "Do you think he was happier in that position or as King?"

"Oh without a doubt he was happier on the flank. He preferred to take the battle to the enemy rather than wait for them to come to him."

"Even with all his forces to command - ready to fall for him?"

"Well, as King he has always wanted to lead from the front - as his mother did but that's not how it works. By the time he gets to take part in the battle.."

I interrupted "He has limited forces left and is somewhat more vulnerable."

"Exactly." The ape smiled at me. "You have a plan, don't you?"

"Yes I think we can use that vulnerability to our advantage. It's risky though and it won't work unless the Reptilia act how I need them to."

Augustus puffed his cheeks, "You want to speak to their king? I can do that for you."

"I am hoping you would but I also need something else from you my friend."

"Oh so I am your friend, now you want something from me?" The greying chimp stared at me and then smiled. "I think I like that."

"You may not like it when you hear what you have to do."

"I take it this is something only I can do then?"

"I'm afraid so. I am also presuming your reputation as Servus' enemy goes beyond the Simians."

"Oh I should hope so. I'd be disappointed if it didn't." He grinned, "So tell me this plan of yours."

I outlined my thoughts over the next hour or so, fine-tuning them as Augustus told me more about the Reptilia king. To my surprise he told me the Reptilia were ruled not by a Tyrannosaur or other fierce-looking dinosaur but by an old giant tortoise called Sapie. Apparently, being one of the older factions, the Reptilia considered experience to be greater than strength. This made me feel better because for this plan to work I needed the Reptilia king to be able to see the wisdom of my request.

As Augustus prepared to leave I asked him one last question.

"In the King's chamber you first advised me not to touch the Container because I didn't know what it might do to me. Then later you told me to open it anyway."

"Which you did, I note." he said.

"Yes, I didn't really think about it I suppose but why warn me and then tell me to do it anyway?"

"The warning was not for your ears. Sharif was near and I wanted him to report to Servus that we believed in the magic of the Container. Once he had left to make his report, I knew it was safe to touch the Container."

"So you don't believe in the magic?"

"Oh yes I do but I know that this Container doesn't work like the one you touched at the zoo."

"Really?"

"Yes, several copies of the Container were made and dispatched to the human world with instructions that any child matching the prophecy was to be given the box. You'll recall that nothing happened to Titan when he touched it, only to you."

"I hadn't thought of that." I said.

"That's because the magic in those boxes only works for humans not

apes. The magic in the Container only works when it is complete. Once it is complete. Once the last piece falls into place the magic will work."

"What will happen to Titan and the others if I succeed? Will they be stranded on Earth?"

He nodded. "They always knew it was a one-way ticket. There are other copies made by other factions too. Across your world are numerous copies of the Container waiting for the right child to touch them. Once that child does they would be whisked to the appropriate faction."

"So in a way it's pure luck that I ended up here?"

"Probably. I have no doubt that King Sapie will have placed his own Container copy at the same zoo. It may be our good fortune that you passed the ape-house before the reptile-house. Now I must go." He stood and placed one large hand on my shoulder. He may have been old but it was only then I realised he still had immense strength. "My lad, you have been a revelation to me. My one regret is that I will not see you again when this is over."

"I will not forget you Augustus and thank you."

He turned and started to leave. Just as he did, he looked back at me and said "Remember, when the last piece falls into place. Timing will be everything." I nodded and he left.

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The next morning I arrived at the throne room. Servus enquired after Augustus and I simply told him that the chimp would join us at the battle itself. So we set off for the battle hall. This involved even more climbing and swinging. My arms were tired and at one point I thought I was going to lose my grip. Fortunately a gorilla grabbed me and swung me onto her back. I clung for dear life as we swooped and swung across the halls. Finally we reached the great battle hall and I gasped.

The corridor opened into a huge chamber, bigger than a sports stadium and filled with similar seating and stands on either side. The seats and terraces were filled with an array of creatures: not all of which I recognised. I was escorted by Servus to a boxed seating area on the left. As I walked I could hear the whooping and cheering stop in an instant to be replaced by muttering, pointing and then even more noise. At first I was confused by all this until I realised I was the only human in the room.

Eventually I was led to a large platform overlooking one end of the battle arena. I gazed across the patterned floor and then looked to the corresponding platform at the opposite end. There sat a single figure. It was Augustus who would be acting as general for the Reptilia. I would do the same for the Simians. Our jobs would be to direct the battle. I couldn't quite see his eyes but, as I looked at him, Augustus nodded.

A fanfare sounded and through two side doors marched the warriors for each side. Servus looked proud and grand leading his army into the arena. Behind him came a large female gorilla, followed by two of the orangutan advisers I saw at the throne room. These in turn were followed by two squat chimpanzees and finally two smaller gorillas. Finally came eight tamarin with long arms. Beside them came the Reptilia led of course by Sapie and another - I presumed female - giant tortoise, then came two velociraptors, two komodo dragons and two triceratops. At the back of this column came eight geckos. Servus looked at me and then at my opposing general. He roared when he saw it was Augustus.

"So your treachery really does know no bounds my old tutor!" he shouted. Augustus simply nodded back.

The two sides took their positions, each warrior moving to their own designated space. A large gong sounded and a mouse, in elaborate robes, strode, purposefully into the centre of the battle arena.

"This is the last, this is the final. Here it ends!" the mouse spoke with a surprisingly loud voice. The crowd stood and cheered. The noise was deafening. The mouse held up its staff and the crowd hushed itself.

"At last we come to these two. On the white side: the Reptilia!" Another cacophony of noise rose as he said this. "On the black: we have , the Simians!" The apes whooped, shrieked and roared. The mouse held its staff aloft again, when the crowd was quiet, it said "Is the white general ready?"

"I am so!" cried Augustus. A gasp and a whisper went around the large hall as the crowd realised who he was. This was nothing in comparison to the silence when the mouse asked if I was ready. I felt like every single eye in the room was focussed on me, mostly because it was true.

"Let the battle commence!" said the mouse and it turned and walked off the arena.

I looked at the desk in front of me, on it was a perfect replica of the

battle below. Each warrior represented by a carved wooden piece and placed in a corresponding position on a replica of the chequered arena floor. I glanced at Augustus. As the general on the white side he would make the first move. This is why the word “battle” was not really accurate for this event. The two generals took turns to move warriors into positions which they believed would gain them an advantage. There were six class of warriors on each side and each class was restricted in how they could move across the floor. As I moved a corresponding piece on my replica the warrior would move below me. I looked down at my warriors and as I did Servus caught my eye. He glared and roared “Do not fail me now boy!”

The final part

“I just want to go home”

“The warriors will be silent!” the mouse shouted from its position on the side of the arena. Beside the mouse lay the Container, now open. It had been carried in, suspended on poles, by a gibbon and a oviraptor. Even now the superstition continued. They dare not touch it.

Augustus made his first move, a gecko positioned before Sapie stepped forward. This was not a surprise as every move was planned between us. I made my move and a tamarin scurried into place. We made several moves each and then I realised it was time to strike. I picked up the piece representing the female gorilla and moved it out. She shuffled forward and looked at me. I knew why.

This move left her and Servus exposed. One move from Augustus and Servus himself would be under threat. Augustus faked amusement and made his move. To everyone’s surprise he mimicked my last move and left Sapie similarly exposed. I tried to look like I was concentrating and moved one of the smaller gorillas. Augustus made his move.

Murmurs started to rise around the room as the smarter spectators began to see where this was heading. They clearly reasoned that if we continued as we were we would reach a stalemate and nobody would win.

Move came and move went. Some warriors were removed from the arena as one of the opposing faction’s warriors took their position on the arena floor. There was no bloodshed, just as Augustus has told me. Instead each warrior would yield its position to the incoming opposing warrior. have to say was amazed at the way this all worked. As each warrior was defeated it and its corresponding carved wooden piece simply disappeared. Usually this was followed by a rousing chorus of groans from that warriors faction and cheers from the opposition. This was all part of our plan too. In order to reach our conclusion we had to reduce the numbers.

Augustus and I made each move to perfection until at last we reached a point where only a handful of warriors remained on each side. The next three moves would be vital. For the reptilia there stood Sapie, a velociraptor and a triceratops. For the Simians there remained Servus and two tamarind. My forces were dangerously exposed and Servus

was extremely unhappy about it. Augustus could, if he wanted, defeat me within two moves. I picked up the carved representation of Servus and moved it one place to the right. Servus himself huffed and snorted but replicated the move. Augustus moved the triceratops into line with Servus, the two creatures staring at each other across the arena. This was not permitted and I had to use my move to rectify the situation or surrender. I picked up my Servus piece and moved it back to where it had just come from. Again Servus moved on the arena floor. Again Augustus moved the triceratops to be in line with Servus. I slowly moved Servus to the place on his right again. Augustus repeated his move with the triceratops. The crowd grew raucous and the mouse had to step on the arena and raise its staff to silence them.

This was it, this next move would bring the end. Slowly I picked up the small, carved Servus and placed it back to the left of where it now stood. The crowd erupted. Some out of confusion, some out of wonder, some out of rage. This was the third time the warriors had been in this exact arrangement. Under the terms of the battle, this meant the battle was a draw.

Neither side had won.

Servus roared and glared at me. If he could he would have climbed up and attacked me, I'm sure of it. But he didn't, he couldn't. All the remaining warriors disappeared at once and even in the ruckus on the battle hall everybody heard the solid "thunk" as the Container closed, signalling the end of the battle. The mouse stepped forward and raised its staff again. The crowd eventually fell silent. The mouse spoke slowly and carefully.

"Never in our history has this occurred. The battle is a draw. There is no victor!" The crowd cried out as one but the mouse continued speaking anyway. "The two generals must now join me and we will decide what will happen next."

Augustus and I walked down to the arena floor and joined the mouse, now standing beside the closed container. The mouse wrung its paws and looked at us both.

"Well?" it said, "What do you plan to do? Shall we have a rematch, call this battle void or we can start the battles all over again but I warn you the latter will leave us with no ruling faction."

"With respect my lord Geep," Augustus said, "there is another option. One made possible only by the presence of my esteemed opponent here." The mouse looked concerned, "You are aware of the prophecy?" Augustus asked.

“Yes, yes, of course I am!” the mouse spluttered, “but how do you expect us to continue without the battles? There must be battles. We will have anarchy without them!”

“That’s not true Geep!” Augustus said and then smiled at the mouse, “My friend, you know as well as I do that in the event of a draw the two generals can elect to stop the battles altogether.” The crowd murmured as they realised what this meant to their way of life.

“That law was rescinded years ago!”

“No it wasn’t. It was altered so that it may only be used if one of the generals was a human. I presume everybody thought that would be so unlikely that the battles would never be stopped.”

The mouse turned to me. “What of you, human? What do you think about all of this.”

I took a deep breath and said the lines I had rehearsed. “I see no interest in the continuance of the battles. If my opponent is in agreement I propose we herewith halt all battles.”

“I am in agreement.” Augustus said.

Try to imagine a large room full of many kinds of animal and bird, totalling hundreds of thousands of creatures. Now imagine that each creature yelling, shrieking or roaring at the top of their lungs. This is what happened when Augustus finished speaking. I can’t blame them really, what we had just done would change their lives forever. There would be no more battles, which meant no more victors, which meant no more rulers. This meant either an end to tyranny for the oppressed or an end to luxury for the oppressors so the noise was either one of joy or anger. Eventually Geep held his staff aloft and quietened them all.

“This ruling is permitted but there must be a proposal for how conflict will be settled in place of the battles.” the mouse turned to me.

“I propose that copies be made of the replica arenas used by the generals. These copies should be made without the capability to move warriors - this is no longer needed. The copies will be distributed among the factions and when the leader of the faction cannot or will not settle a disagreement, a replica battle - a game - will be played out on these smaller versions. No warriors need be lost. When a conflict arises between two factions then the same type of game will take place between the champions of each faction.”

“And the winner of each game is entitled only to what was agreed

before the game began!" Augustus added.

"Yes." I concurred. "Those who refuse to abide by this - whether individuals or entire factions - must leave the confines of this world and find solace in their own company elsewhere."

The mouse looked stunned. The room was in silence for what seemed to be ages. Finally the mouse spoke. "This is just." he said. "What of the rules of these games?"

"They will be the same as the battles, each piece will be positioned in the same place at the start of the game. The white player must go first and each piece is restricted to the same movement patterns as in the battles." "What do we call this - since they are no longer battles?" a voice came from the crowd.

"Where I am from we play this game. We call it chess. I suggest you use that name."

And that was that. The battles had ended and I had indeed brought about the end of tyranny and oppressive rule in that world. The battle had in the end been a huge game of chess. Each warrior being one of the pieces on a chessboard. Eventually the crowd left and only myself, Geep and Augustus remained.

"What will you do now?" Geep asked me.

"I want to go home." I said.

He nodded, as did my friend Augustus. "You know how." Said the greying chimp "and thank you." He picked up the Container and handed it to me. I took it without thinking and suddenly everything went black. I opened my eyes and cried "No, not yet!" I had not had a chance to reply. The Container had acted as soon as I touched it.

"Shh, it's okay." a familiar voice said while a hand stroked my head. I looked up into the eyes of my mother. I was laying on a bed of sorts in a white room with one small window and a couple of chairs.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"You're in the recovery room of the medical centre at the zoo." My Dad replied from behind her. "You passed out. They think it might have been the heat."

"We're just glad you're okay." Mum added.

"I feel okay now just a bit tired. When can we go home?" I asked.

“”Soon as you like.” Dad said, “We’ll have to take you to the Doctor in the morning, just to make sure.”

“What about the zoo trip?”

“We’ll come another day.” Mum smiled. “Which reminds me. The zoo were concerned about you and have given you a gift. They didn’t need to really. It wasn’t their fault you fainted. They’re just being nice.”

“What is it?”

“Here.” Dad said and handed me a wooden box which looked very familiar. It looked just like the Container. I opened it and saw an array of carved wooden chess pieces. The white pieces were of various reptiles and the black pieces were all apes or monkeys. I smiled. The top of the box lid had an illustrated title page stuck to it. The title said “Animal chess” and below that it said “Let battle commence!” The photo was of a grumpy but very familiar looking old chimpanzee. “If you don’t like it, we can give it to your cousin,” Dad said, “he likes chess.”

“No, I’ll keep hold of it.” I said.

“Great. Well if you like I’ll give you a game when we get home.”

“That would be good Dad.” I said and stared at the gorilla-shaped King piece nestled in the box.

The End

About the author

Ryan Cartwright is a web developer, author and cartoonist who loves stories. He lives in the UK with his wife, two children, nutty dog and a tyrannical cat. He has a weakness for wine gums.

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